

WASHINGTON, D.C.

**W**hen a Trans World Airlines plane plowed into a rugged Virginia mountainside while attempting to land at Dulles International Airport in a storm last Dec. 1, it produced a side accident upsetting to U.S. defense authorities: It cut the power lines carrying electricity to the secret government installation known as Mt. Weather.

Fortunately the power disruption was only temporary because the highly classified base buried deep inside the mountain has its own generators which can provide electricity for months if necessary.

But the incident was disturbing nonetheless because it indicated the vulnerability of one of the primary "emergency location facilities" designed to provide bombproof headquarters for the President and U.S. military command in the event of a nuclear attack on this country. And it also focused public attention upon a facet of the U.S. defense setup which the government prefers to cloak in silence—the existence of a chain of supposedly impenetrable command hideaways and emergency installations throughout the capital area.

### 'Worst-kept secret'

Apparently such installations are neither as secure nor as secret as their planners intended. Following the TWA crash, some of Mt. Weather's neighbors termed the base "the government's worst-kept secret." Newspaper stories appeared describing the facility as a worldwide communications base for the Central Intelligence Agency. Brett Phillips, a reporter for a local newspaper, pointed out that an estate in the area had been bought by a group of Russians ostensibly as a "country retreat" but more likely "to keep an eye on Mt. Weather," which is 7½ miles southeast of Berryville, Va., and not quite 50 miles northwest of Washington.

Someone who did keep an eye on Mt. Weather was a Washington "underground" newspaper, *The Quicksilver Times*, which in 1970 published an article entitled "You Are Now Entering the Underground White House."

"When that article was published," recalls one ex-security aide, "it disturbed a lot of people in the intelli-

# The Government's Nuclear Hideaways— How Secret? How Safe?

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by Robert Walters



Barbed wire and warning signs protect U.S. underground command post at Raven Rock Mountain, Pa.—but local residents know its site, how to get there.

gence community. It was completely accurate, and it obviously had been written by someone who had been inside."

The article described in painstaking detail a vast hollowed-out area inside a mountain complete with streets, sidewalks, curbs, manholes and three-story-high buildings. It contains offices, residences, a cafeteria, a hospital and a water supply consisting of an underground lake so large that a person could water-ski on it.

This subterranean military-command communications center, which took 21 years to build, according to the under-

ground paper, is protected by concrete, steel and lead mechanized doors so massive that it takes 15 minutes to open them. The nerve center is a huge circular assembly room containing "a stage, podium and hanging world map with lights that illuminate the locations of the Strategic Air Command, naval vessels, missile sites and so on. . ."

Mt. Weather is only one of the sites selected by the federal government in the early 1950's, at the height of the Cold War, to serve as wartime command posts for the nation's most important political and military leaders: In each case, the government carved out the base of a mountain and installed elaborate communications systems. The

command posts are designed to be virtually indestructible because they are protected by hundreds of feet of solid rock on all sides.

Another "emergency relocation facility" lies deep in the heart of Raven Rock Mountain, east of the small town of Blue Ridge Summit, Pa., midway between Hagerstown, Md., and Gettysburg, Pa., and less than 65 miles northwest of Washington. A \$30,000 helicopter pad was constructed at the Army's nearby Fort Ritchie to enable government officials to reach the mountain hideaway in less than an hour.

Here, too, the government has sought—and failed—to maintain maximum security and secrecy. For example, the



*This "flying headquarters"—a 747 loaded with advanced electronic gear—is being developed to serve the President and his advisers as a safe wartime base.*

facility is referred to at Fort Ritchie, which provides support services, only as "Site R." Although an estimated 300 to 400 people report to work at the facility every day to keep it in readiness, access is limited to those who hold a special security clearance.

But it wasn't always that way. In building the installation, the government hired 2000 workers—none of whom was screened—to excavate and haul away 500,000 cubic yards of rock from inside the mountain. During construction, salesmen and equipment servicemen were allowed into the huge cavern without any security checks.

### **The news spreads**

It didn't take long for local residents to learn details of the project. "When you're scooping out the inside of a mountain, you really can't keep it much of a secret," says one Raven Rock area resident.

In 1955, shortly after the facility was

completed, President Dwight D. Eisenhower led 1500 government workers in a test evacuation of Washington, and for three days the federal bureaucracy was directed from the inside of Raven Rock Mountain. Newspaper reporters were taken along on the trip and allowed to report on the exercise, but they were specifically prohibited from identifying the location of the base. Despite efforts to maintain security, the local newspapers reported with considerable pride that virtually all of official Washington, including the President, had moved temporarily to the area.

In the case of these installations, security and secrecy have been compromised, perhaps to the point where they can no longer serve their intended purpose of protecting crucial government functions in the event of nuclear war. "I'm sure the Russians have had an intercontinental missile targeted on Raven Rock Mountain for many years," says one Army officer at Fort Ritchie.

### **Airborne HQ**

In recent years, the government has

taken steps to provide more secure facilities for the President and other key officials in case of attack. Several large passenger jets were converted and equipped for use as airborne command posts in time of war.

Now a new system is being developed—the E-4 Advanced Airborne Command Post. It will provide the National Military Command System and the Strategic Air Command with a Boeing 747 capable of long endurance missions comparatively safe from Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles.

The President could be housed in such a flying "island," or could communicate with his airborne military chieftains from the ground. Even in a war directed from above, this nation's underground command shelters remain an essential part of its defenses against nuclear attack.